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Empowering Students: The Hidden Impact of Academic Optimism on Self-Awareness and Communication

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Abstract: *This study explores the influence of teachers' academic optimism on the development of soft skills, specifically self-awareness and communication, among secondary school students. Academic optimism, encompassing self-efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis, is a crucial factor in enhancing the quality of the teaching-learning process. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from secondary school teachers and students through validated questionnaires. The results reveal that trust in parents is the strongest predictor of both self-awareness and communication, underscoring the importance of a supportive and trusting environment in students' holistic development. While self-efficacy and academic emphasis also contribute positively to these soft skills, their effects are less pronounced. The findings suggest that fostering an environment where trust and academic optimism are central can significantly enhance students' interpersonal skills, preparing them for success both within and beyond the classroom. This study highlights the need for educational strategies that prioritize parental involvement and academic rigor to promote comprehensive student development.*

Key Words: Academic Optimism, Self-Awareness, Communication Skills, Soft Skills Development

Introduction

The significant function of education is the empowerment of an individual with relevant knowledge and skills for leading life successfully. Education, being a process of socialization, is a characteristic feature of human society. The highest goal of our education is the wholesome and all-round development of an individual's personality. Therefore, education focuses on refining the areas of cognitive, effective, and psychomotor domains of a child for his healthy and balanced growth. The nation's socioeconomic status can be changed and developed in significant ways through education. It is crucial in advancing the goal of broadening the perception of society along with its need for more knowledge and awareness (O'Leary & Griggs, 2010).

The quality of education depends upon the quality of teachers, which is clearly indicated by the maxim, "As the teacher, so the taught". Teacher endowed with academic optimism knows that success is the outcome of untiring efforts with patience. He believes that he can work out the success by engaging students in activities with a sense of positive outcomes. The concept of academic optimism was put forward for the first time by Hoy et al. (2006). It refers to the teacher's complete faith in his ability to improve student's learning through useful changes in a classroom environment. It is the result of an interaction between teachers' self-efficacy, the learning environment, and their faith in the total support of pupils and their parents (Hoy et al., 2006). Academic optimism strengthens the personality features of the teachers that have a direct impact on student's performance (Kılınç et al., 2023). It represents the teachers' conviction in their earnest efforts in the teaching and learning process that surely results in pupils' strength of making positive improvements (Hoy et al., 2008). It is deeply ingrained in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral spheres of a teacher's personality. Academic emphasis is the outcome of

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behavioral domains, self-efficacy indicates cognitive, and the teacher's trust in learners and parents is related to the affective domain of the teacher. It is a process of creating and maintaining a teacher's commitment to achieving educational goals through improved teaching and learning procedures.

Research has demonstrated that a teacher's belief in expecting the best out of all his efforts has been a source of his motivation towards achievement of his life goals. Teachers with a positive mindset are highly motivated to get excellent grades in educational institutions. Self-efficacy enables them to realize that they can skillfully enhance the maximum learning of the students. It is also the core of Bandura's (2006) social-cognitive theory, which claims that when a person believes in himself that he can complete the task at hand successfully, this sense of his belief is enough to bring about significant change because it adds a component of enthusiasm in one's performance that generate more energy to reach higher levels of objectives. Academic excellence is anticipated throughout the school's entire structure as and when this element is put into effect. Encouraging people to work for high standards and raising the academic expectations of teachers, school administrators, and the community all improve the overall scenario of both instructors and learners effectively (Messick, 2012).

Looking for optimistic possibilities, favorable academic outcomes, and pleasant events of educational success are the building blocks of academic optimism. Being optimistic about oneself, other people, things, events, and the world at large all lead to creating positive expectations, which are the components of general optimism. Similarly, teacher's professional strength, favorable teaching, and learners' success are the outcomes of academic optimism (Gholampour et al., 2019). A teacher's academic optimism is his personal conviction resulting from environmental influences of the changing roles of teachers and learners. In favorable conditions, learners advance with remarkable success when there is a trusting relationship between students and teachers, an environment of academic emphasis, and the development of a sense of oneness and ownership of the educational environment.

Carlgren (2013) proposes that high school students should be required to take a course focused on developing soft skills, specifically critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. However, implementing such a course would necessitate changes in the education system to overcome barriers like teacher preparedness, allocating time to teach the course, and addressing the pressure of high-stakes testing, which often dominates educational priorities (Carlgren, 2013). While offering a full course dedicated to soft skills would be ideal, my intervention of a pull-out training group addresses some of the challenges highlighted by Carlgren. The group would be led by a school counselor and located in a setting less invested in test scores.

This approach allows for a greater emphasis on the real-world applicability of these skills for students without being constrained by test scores or standards-related concerns that are prevalent in many educational environments. Below, briefly review the core soft skills addressed in this research study, including communication, collaboration, and goal setting.

Levasseur (2017) identifies communication as a fundamental interpersonal soft skill. Communication consists of several components, including listening, verbal communication, written communication, and feedback. It is valuable in any context and has been found to be particularly important during adolescence (Erozkan, 2013). While studying communication and perceived self-efficacy, Erozkan (2013) discovered that communication skills are correlated with social self-efficacy in high school students. Students with high levels of social self-efficacy were more likely to adopt positive problem-solving approaches, exhibit increased self-confidence, and they will demonstrate a willingness to resolve interpersonal issues (Erozkan, 2013).

Self-awareness in high school students is an important aspect of their personal and academic development. It refers to the ability to recognize and understand one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, values, and the impact of one's behavior on others. Therefore, for high school students, developing self-awareness is vital as it lays the foundation for emotional intelligence, responsible decision-making, and effective interpersonal relationships (Goleman, 1995). Teaching self-awareness in high schools includes the development of an environment where students are encouraged to reflect on their thoughts and behaviors, understand their learning styles, and set personal and academic goals. Self-awareness helps

students manage their emotions effectively. Understanding their emotional triggers and responses, students may develop strategies to cope with stress, frustration, and other negative emotions. This emotional regulation is crucial for maintaining mental well-being and creating a positive learning environment (Goleman, 1995).

Understanding their strengths and weaknesses enables students to employ tactics that enrich their learning experiences. For example, a student who acknowledges that they grasp concepts better through visual aids can actively seek out resources that align with this learning style. Self-awareness also empowers students to pinpoint areas needing improvement and reach out for assistance, eventually resulting in improved academic performance (Zimmerman, 2002). High school serves as a crucial period for students to forge significant social connections. Self-aware students are better equipped to grasp others' perspectives, leading to more compassionate and effective communication. This, in turn, can diminish conflicts and cultivate a supportive peer environment (Ngang et al., 2015).

Soft skills encompass a range of non-academic competencies, such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, and critical thinking, which are crucial for success in the workplace and daily life activities. Usually, they are not assessed through general evaluation of the students in schools. However, teachers play a vital role in the development of soft skills in their students. The secondary school level serves as a link between the elementary school level and the higher education level. Students at this level have already reached their puberty stage which abounds in issues and challenges related to socialization in the era of globalization. Traditional roles in the family have changed, and parents are helpless in dealing with the situation effectively. The physical changes and hormonal disorders may cause anxiety, stress, and confusion among individuals. To deal with the risk of violence and mental imbalances, soft skills are found to be useful in making the right decisions in critical situations. Soft skills have been incorporated in all levels of the curriculum in Pakistan, but teachers are not following the policy and directions in the true sense of actual classroom practices (Manan et al., 2021).

Despite the acknowledged importance of soft skills and the practice of updating the existing curricula with emphasis on the intervention of soft skills for preparing students to lead a successful life, there remains a need to explore the factors that contribute to the development of these skills in the students. One potential factor is the academic optimism of secondary school teachers. It refers to the teacher's sense of self-efficacy, trust in students and parents, and academic emphasis. It increases the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and the learning process at school (Hoy et al., 2006).

Research Querstions

This article aims to find the effect of teachers' academic optimism on their students' self-awareness and communication skills. The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. How do teachers at the secondary school level perceive academic optimism?
2. What is the relationship between teachers' academic optimism and students' soft skills (Self-Awareness, Effective Communication)
3. What is the effect of teachers' academic optimism on students' soft skills (Self-Awareness, Effective Communication)

Research Methodology

A thorough understanding of the design, principles, and statistical ideas required to interpret the actual data is provided by research design with relevant statistical analysis (Myers et al., 2013). The study is quantitative in nature, and the notions of dependent variables, Soft Skills (self-awareness, communication), and independent variables (Academic Optimism) were measured through a questionnaire. For academic optimism, a scale developed by Hoy et al. (2006) was adopted with proper consent from the author. A scale was developed for assessing the soft skills (self-awareness, communication)

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication	1343	12.69	2.29
Self-Awareness	1343	12.92	2.60
Self-Efficacy	1346	288.38	1.85
Trust in Parents	1346	480.48	1.24
Academic Emphasis	1346	313.01	1.39

The table above revealed that variables such as Self-Efficacy, Trust in Parents, and Academic Emphasis have relatively high mean values and low standard deviations, indicating that these factors are uniformly high among the participants with little variation. Communication and Self-Awareness have moderate mean scores with slightly higher standard deviations, indicating more variability in how participants perceive these aspects. The means and standard deviation differences indicated that certain variables (such as Self-Efficacy and Trust in Parents) are consistently perceived, while others (like Communication and Self-Awareness) show more variability.

Table 2

Correlations between academic optimism and DVs (Self Awareness and communication)

		Self-Efficacy	Trust in Parents	Academic Emphases	Age	Academic Qualification	Professional Qualification	Teaching Experience
Self-Awareness	r	.229**	.323**	.227**	-.054*	-0.005	-0.011	-0.046
	r^2	5.24%	10.43%	5.15%	0.29%	0.00%	0.01%	0.21%
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.048	0.870	0.681	0.101
	N	1343	1343	1343	1343	1325	1336	1254
Communication	r	.201**	.252**	.152**	-0.021	-0.005	-0.019	-0.033
	r^2	4.04%	6.35%	2.31%	0.04%	0.00%	0.04%	0.11%
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.450	0.863	0.477	0.242
	N	1343	1343	1343	1343	1325	1336	1254

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows that Trust in Parents has the strongest correlation with both self-awareness (r = 0.323) and communication (r = 0.252), explaining the most variance in these dependent variables (10.43% and 6.35%, respectively). Self-Efficacy and Academic Emphasis have weak but significant positive correlations with self-awareness and communication. Age, Academic Qualification, Professional Qualification, and Teaching Experience generally show very weak or no significant correlations with either self-awareness or communication, indicating that they are not strong predictors of these outcomes.

Table 3

Linear regression analysis of the effect of academic optimism of teachers on the development of students' soft skills (Self-awareness and communication)

Variables	DV	B	SE	β	p	95 % CI LL	95 % CI UL	R²	Δ R²	F
Constant		6.86	.48		.00	5.93	7.80			
Self-Efficacy	Self-Awareness	.00	.00	.09	.00	.00	.00	.12	.12	59.53
Trust in Parents		.01	.00	.26	.00	.01	.01			
Academic Emphasis		.00	.00	.07	.01	.00	.00			

Variables	DV	B	SE	β	p	95 % CI		R^2	ΔR^2	F
						LL	UL			
Constant	Communication	8.26	.45		.00	7.37	9.15			
Self-Efficacy		.00	.00	.11	.00	.00	.00	.08	.07	36.56
Trust in Parents		.01	.00	.21	.00	.01	.01			
Academic Emphasis		.00	.00	.01	.65	.00	.00			

The regression results in the above tables revealed that Trust in Parents has the strongest positive effect (β = 0.26) on self-awareness, followed by Self-Efficacy (β = 0.09) and Academic Emphasis (β = 0.07). The model explains a moderate amount of variance in self-awareness (R^2 = 0.12), meaning that these predictors together provide a moderate level of explanation for differences in self-awareness.

Trust in Parents also has a significant effect on communication (β = 0.21), with Self-Efficacy having a smaller but still significant effect (β = 0.11). Academic Emphasis does not significantly predict communication (p = 0.65). The model explains less variance in communication (R^2 = 0.08) compared to self-awareness, indicating that other unmeasured factors might be more influential for communication. Trust in Parents emerges as a consistent and significant predictor for both self-awareness and communication, with the models explaining more variance in self-awareness than in communication.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Trust in Parents is more likely to develop stronger soft skills, effective communication, and self-awareness. Similar findings have been reported by Egeli and Rinaldi (2016). This indicates that a strong academic focus within the school environment contributes to the holistic development of students. These results underscore the importance of a supportive and trusting environment, both at home and in school, for the development of students' soft skills. The strong impact of Trust in Parents indicates the vital role of parental involvement and the emotional bond between students and their parents in the development of skills such as communication and self-awareness. This aligns with educational theories emphasizing the importance of challenging academic environments for cognitive development. While self-efficacy is important, its more modest impact indicates that students' belief in their abilities is beneficial but not as influential as the other factors in developing soft skills.

The reasonable consistency of these findings lies in the interplay between home and school environments in shaping students' soft skills. Trust in Parents likely provides a stable emotional foundation, enabling students to engage more effectively in social and interpersonal interactions, which are crucial for soft skills development (Moghari et al., 2011). The impact of Academic Emphasis on cognitive-related skills is consistent with previous research showing that a focus on academic excellence fosters the development of self-awareness. This suggests that the school environment must have a balance of emotional support with academic rigor to cultivate well-rounded individuals. The smaller impact of Self-Efficacy may indicate that while self-confidence is important, it is insufficient on its own to develop soft skills without the supportive context provided by parents and school.

Overall, the results highlight the critical roles of Trust in Parents and Academic Emphasis in the development of students' soft skills. These findings suggest that educational strategies should prioritize strengthening parental involvement and maintaining a strong academic focus to promote the comprehensive development of students' cognitive and interpersonal skills.

Conclusion

This research highlighted the important role of academic optimism in developing critical soft skills, for example, self-awareness and communication among secondary school students. The findings showed that trust in parents is a significant predictor of these skills. It emphasized the essential role of a supportive and trusting environment in students' personal and academic growth. Self-efficacy and academic emphasis also contributed positively, but their impact is comparatively less robust. These results suggest that educational institutions should focus on academic consistency and building strong, trusting

relationships between teachers, students, and parents. Such an approach can develop a universal educational experience that equips students with the soft skills necessary for success in various aspects of life. By integrating strategies that promote academic optimism, schools can create environments that support the comprehensive development of students, preparing them for future challenges.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the importance of academic optimism as a crucial element in education. It advocates for a balanced approach that values both cognitive achievements and the emotional and social growth of students. Future research could explore supplementary factors that affect soft skills development, offering further comprehension of how educators can best support their students' overall success.

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